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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Jackson County

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May, 1942

THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Jackson County

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Howard M. Sauer
C. Scandrette



In 1920, 477 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Jackson county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 111

Each figure represents 100 pupils

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high cost per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Jackson county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution; as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

* * * * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W. P. A. Project No. 265-1-74-57. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Miss Ruth M. Solon, the Jackson County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study were secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

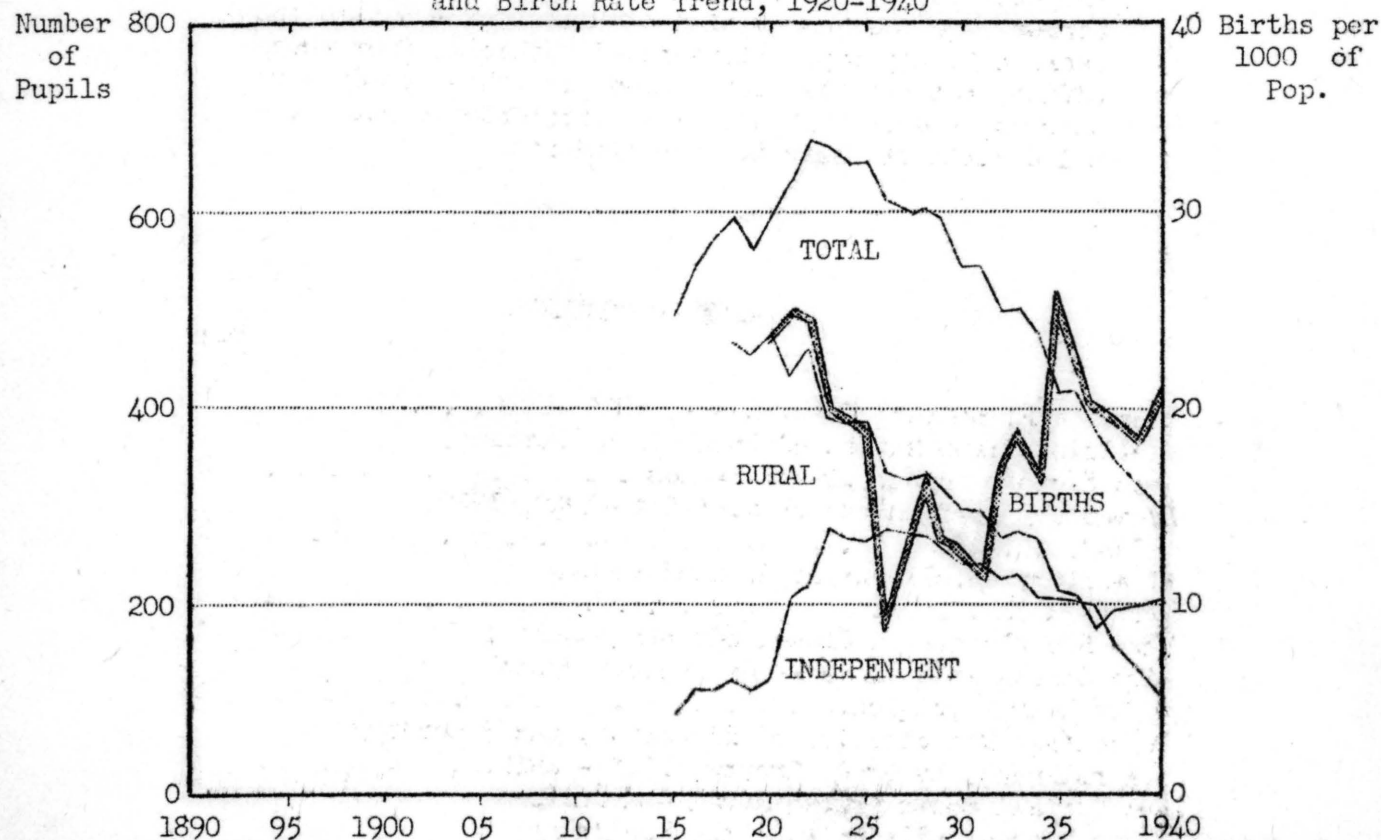
	Page
Trend in Elementary Enrollments, 1915 -1940.	1
Declining Birth Rates and Population Decrease as Factors in Enrollment Trends	2
Elementary Enrollments by District—1920, 1930, 1940.	3
Elementary Enrollment as Related to Cost Per Pupil	4
When Schools can be Closed Advantageously	5
High School Attendance Areas Suggest Basis for Reorganization.	6
Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment, by Grade Groups, 1920 - 1940.	7
How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem.	Back page

The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Jackson County

For a number of years population experts have called attention to widespread lowering of the birth rate and have predicted that a marked reduction in elementary enrollments would naturally follow. This prediction has been in the process of fulfillment in Jackson county since the peak year of 1922 when 680 pupils were enrolled. Since that time elementary enrollment has steadily declined, reaching the all-time low of 308 pupils by 1940. During the same period the number of rural elementary pupils shrank from 463 to 111, a loss of 75.7 percent. Elementary enrollment in the independent districts reached a peak of 279 pupils in 1923 and have gradually declined since that time, reaching an all-time low of 177 in 1937. Since that time a slight upward trend has been noted. Prior to 1915 what is now Jackson county was a part of Stanley county.

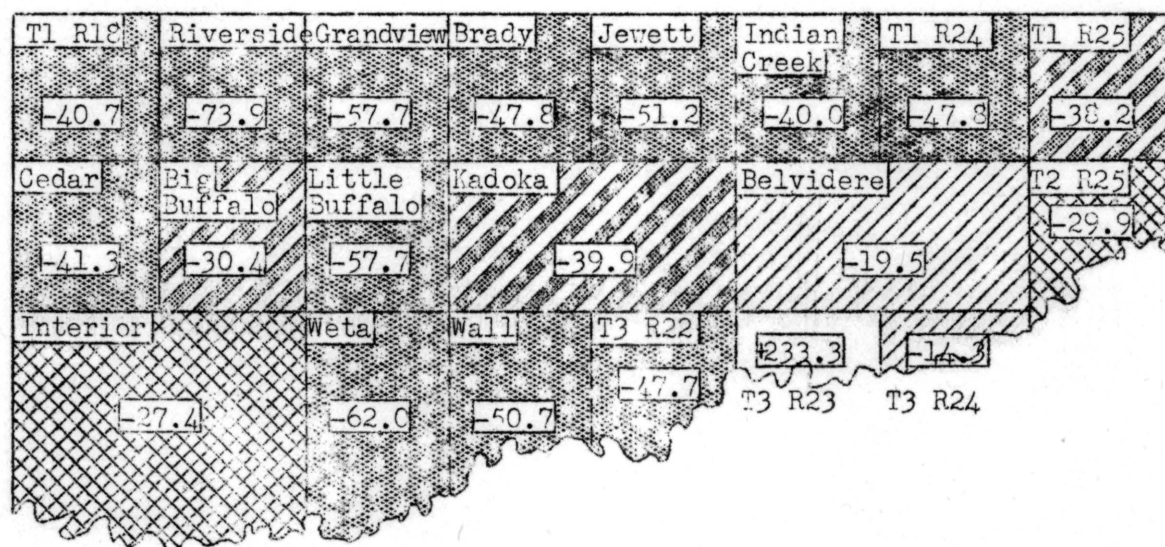
To explain the enrollment decline one must look to two factors--declining birth rates and loss of population through outward migration. The birth rate trend is shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the number of births per 1000 of the population has fluctuated widely in Jackson county, declining from 23.9 to 9.4 between 1920 and 1926, increasing to 26.1 by 1935, and declining to 20.5 by 1940. In spite of the erratic year by year variation in the birth rate, a definite downward tendency is evident. The average number of births per 1000 of the period, was 24.7 as compared with 20.3 during 1936-40, the five years at the close of the period.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Jackson County, 1915-1940, and Birth Rate Trend, 1920-1940



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health

Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Jackson County 1930 - 1940



Legend: Gained Lost 20.0 - 29.9%
 Lost 10.0 - 19.9% Lost 30.0 - 39.9%
 Lost 40.0% or more

Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

Probably the most important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2--the loss of population, largely through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss in Jackson county amounted to 25.8 percent, falling from 2,636 in 1930 to 1,955 by 1940.

With one exception, every township in the county lost population between 1930 and 1940, 12 townships suffering losses of more than 40 percent. Since the combined population for the four incorporated places, Belvidere, Cottonwood, Interior, and Kadoka increased slightly (1.5 percent) during this period the bulk of the county's population losses was suffered by the rural areas--a fact which is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollments.

That a direct relationship exists between population decline and lowered elementary enrollments is indicated by the fact that, in practically every case, townships which had the greatest loss in population (see Figures 2 and 3) had the most pronounced decline in elementary school enrollments.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Jackson County,
1920, 1930 and 1940

Cottonwood			1930, 1936 and 1940						
(13)	Ind.	(12)	(54)	(45)	(44)	(32)	(52)	(53)	(27)
13	37	37	14	11	34	14	19	12	36
17	59	15	12	19	28	7	16	-	33
7	25	-	6	-	8	-	14	-	13
(30)	(75)	(22)	(42)	(21)	(23)	(24)	(80)	-	(38) 19
17	7	9	20	25	15	28	9	15	19
18	5	15	13	13	15	10	4	7	15
4	10	12	-	6	9	17	64	61	60
Interior Ind			(79)	(69)	Kadocla	(72)	6	Ind.	Ind.
55			27	16	83	=			
39			34	14	86				
44			4	-	73				

Legend:

Top figure 1920 enrollments

Middle figure 1930 enrollment

Lower figure 1940 enrollment

Figures in () indicate district numbers

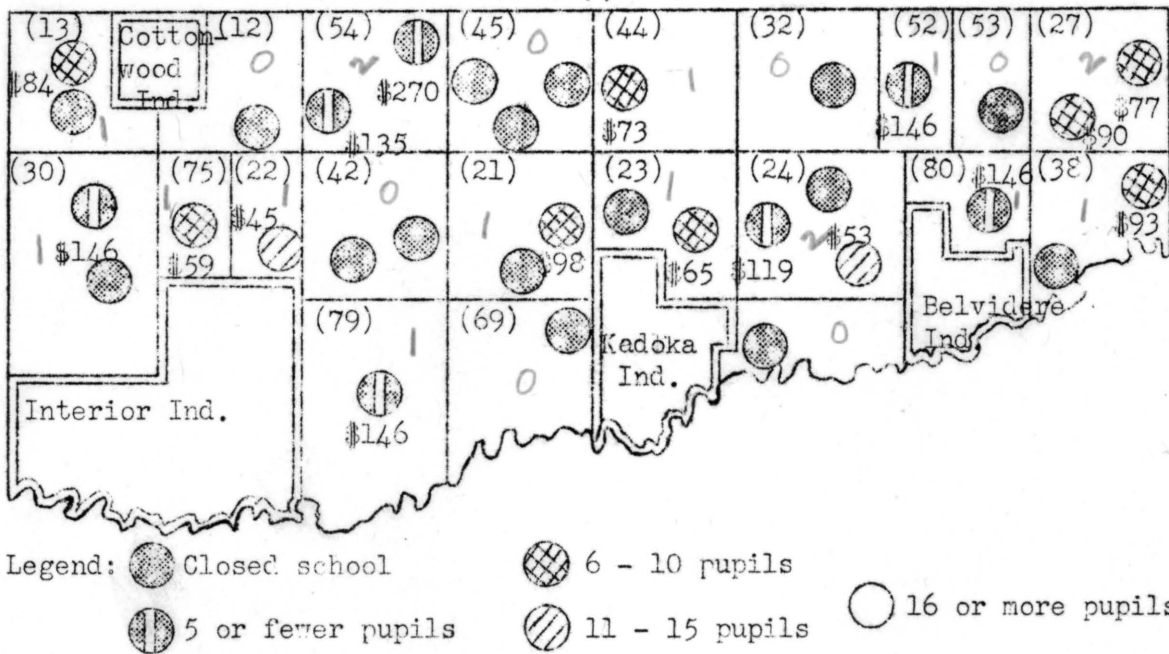
Source: Records of Jackson County Superintendent of Schools

Of the 21 districts in Jackson county, seven had ceased to operate their own schools by 1940 and were sending their remaining pupils to neighborhood districts as tuition pupils. The 14 remaining rural districts operated a total of 17 schools, only three districts operating more than one school. In addition to the common school districts, independent schools were operating at Kadoka, Belvidere, Interior and Cottonwood.

The drastic downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3, which lists the enrollment of each district in the county for 1920, 1930, and 1940.

As a consequence of declining enrollments, 15 schools had been closed by 1940. Seven schools were operating with five or fewer pupils; eight enrolled 6-10 students, and only two had enrollments of 11-15 pupils. In other words, 63.0 percent of the schools in Jackson county were either closed or operating with five or fewer pupils by 1940. Barring unforeseen population changes, further enrollment losses may be expected in coming years, although the rate of decline may not be so rapid.

Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, in Jackson County, 1940



Source: Records of Jackson County Superintendent of Schools

As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Jackson county. In general, it is those schools with the smallest enrollments which show the greatest per pupil cost. In 1940 the cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Jackson county varied from \$45 in Fairview school, District 22, with an enrollment of 12 pupils to \$270 in East Grandview school, District 54, with only two pupils in attendance.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost-per-pupil basis. This is particularly true for schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for the seven schools in this group was \$148.33 as compared with only \$48.75 for schools enrolling from 11 to 15 pupils.

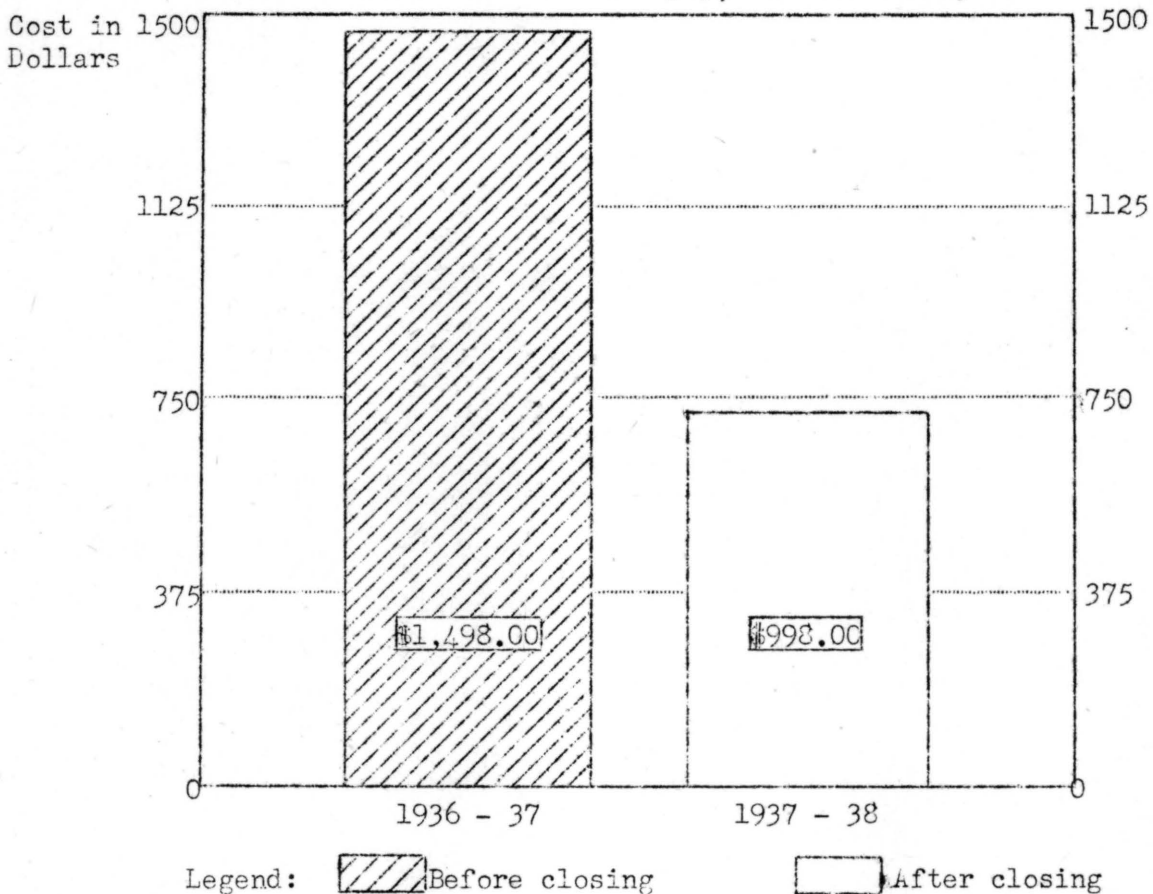
Table 1. Instructional Cost* Per Pupil For Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Jackson County, 1940

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	32	111	\$9,832.50	\$ 85.58
Closed Schools	15	---	---	---
5 or Fewer	7	27	4,005.00	148.33
6 - 10 pupils	8	60	4,657.50	77.61
11 - 15 pupils	2	24	1,170.00	48.75
16 or more pupils	-	--	--	--

* Based on Teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Jackson County Superintendent of Schools.

Figure 5. Cost of Maintaining Educational Facilities Before and After Closing One School in District #13, Jackson County



Source: Records of Jackson County Superintendent of Schools

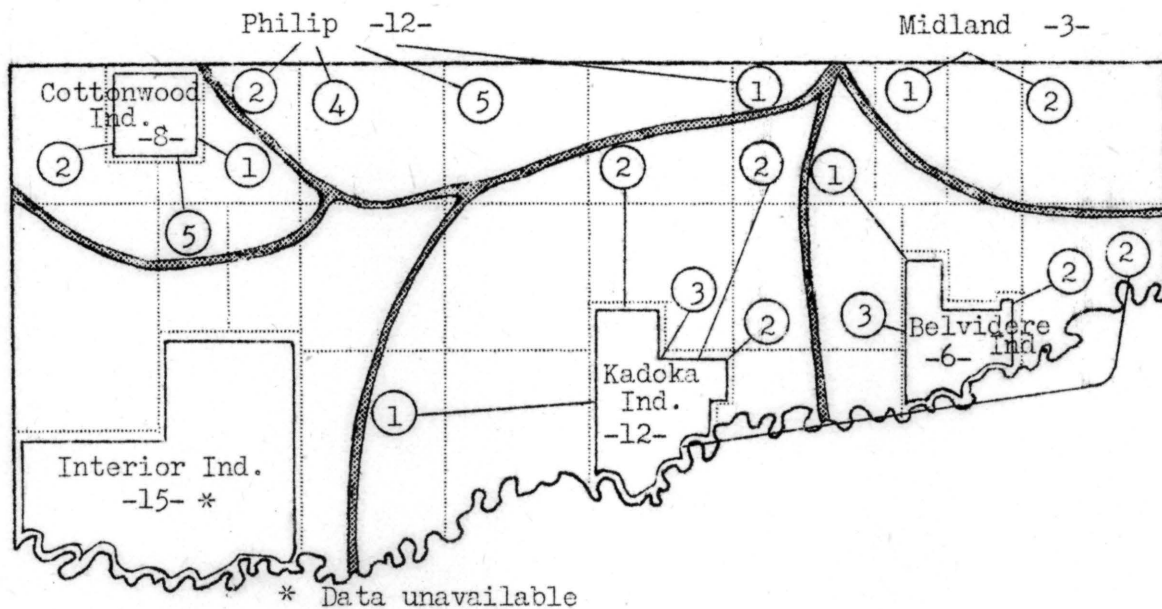
As a means of reducing excessive costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have during recent years closed a large number of low enrollment schools.

During the 1936-37 term, District 13 operated two schools for only 10 pupils at a cost of \$1498.00. The following year the board decided to close one of the schools, sending all remaining pupils to the Hiway school, paying transportation as provided by law. That year the total operating cost to the district was only \$1074.82, a saving of \$611.57 over the previous year.

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and because there is a lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition* it seems advisable both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to get students interested in their studies.

Figure 5. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Jackson County Tuition Students, 1940



Legend:

-0- Number of tuition students attending

○ Number of tuition students from each district

Source: Reports of Jackson County High School Superintendents

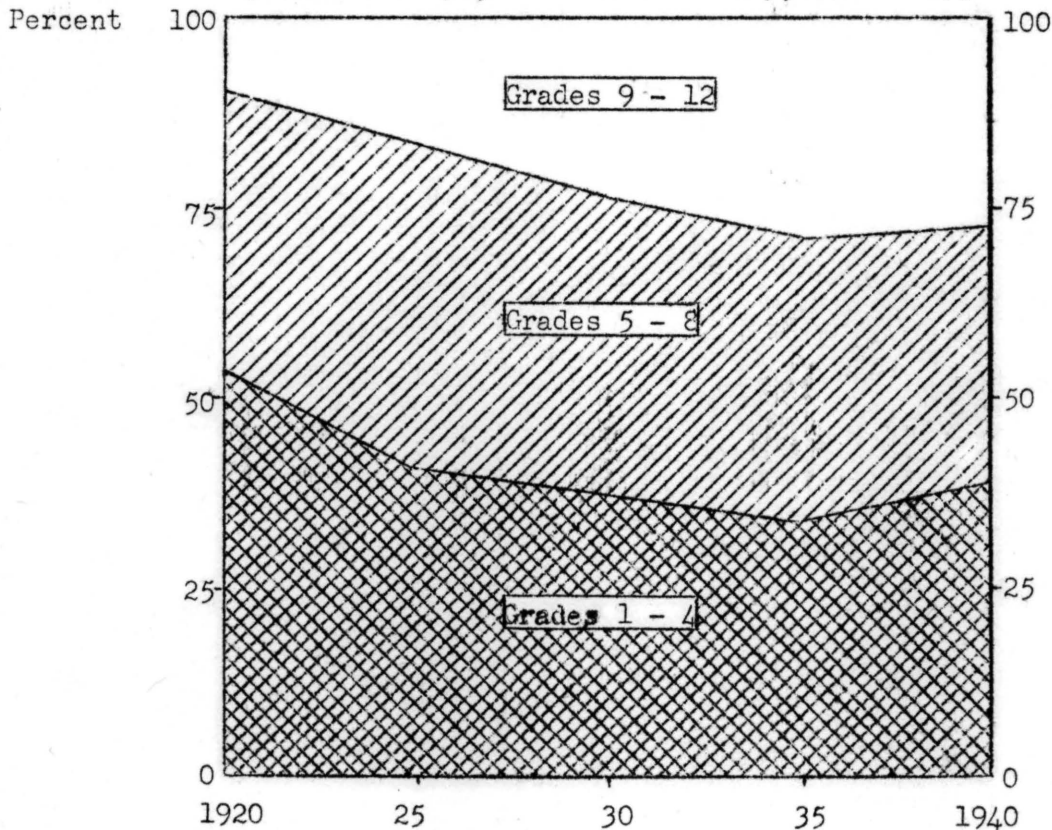
Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for districts without high schools of their own to pay tuition costs for resident students who attend high school outside the district.

Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the rural school boards of Jackson county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Jackson county tuition students, numbering approximately 56 in 1940.

Perhaps a similar plan could be adapted to elementary education. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and costs per pupil to mount, it would appear to be a practical solution to close schools in rural districts, adjacent to independent districts, sending pupils to the town schools as tuition students. This plan has the advantage of economy, and of extending to farm children the superior facilities and techniques of the town school.

However, until such time as concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a pre-determined minimum and sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating, paying tuition if the school to which the pupils are sent is outside the district.

Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments,
By Grade Groups, in Jackson County, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Jackson county shrank from 53.6 to 37.7 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. The explanation of this fact may be found in the birth rate which, although it has varied widely from year to year, has shown an unmistakable downward trend since 1920. As a consequence there have been fewer and fewer children each year to enter the first grade. It is interesting to note in this connection that the proportion of those entering the first grade in 1920 was nearly two times as great (18.2 percent) as in 1940 (9.2 percent). With a greatly reduced number of persons under six years of age it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to decline for a number of years even though the birth rate should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the proportion enrolled in high school was more than three times as large in 1940 as in 1920, increasing from 9.4 to 29.1 percent. This trend may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater number of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table II. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment
By Grades, 1920 - 1940.

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	18.2	11.4	9.3	14.7	9.6	9.0	5.8	12.6	3.8	3.9	0.9	0.8
1925	11.4	10.9	8.6	9.4	11.8	10.3	11.2	9.5	7.2	5.7	2.5	1.5
1930	10.8	8.0	8.4	9.2	8.3	9.1	11.5	10.9	5.6	8.0	4.3	5.9
1935	8.2	8.6	9.2	7.7	8.1	8.9	10.6	9.4	8.5	7.3	6.5	7.0
1940	9.2	8.7	11.3	8.5	10.8	6.5	7.8	8.1	6.0	8.5	6.5	8.1

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935, and 1940.

How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

The county-wide system exists in the four unorganized counties of South Dakota, Shannon, Todd, Washington and Washabaugh. Under this plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.